

Lawmakers say Texas should reimburse El Paso officials for drug war victims treated at Thomason

By Brandi Grissom / Austin Bureau

Posted: 01/28/2009 04:54:21 PM MST

AUSTIN - The state should reimburse El Paso law enforcement for providing increased security at Thomason Hospital, which has been forced to treat victims of the raging violence in Juarez, local lawmakers said Wednesday.

"You've got citizens who are in fear of going to that hospital because they're treating victims of this drug war," said state Rep. Joe Pickett, D-El Paso.

The brutal drug war in Juarez and preventing its spillover into El Paso was the focus of a homeland security briefing lawmakers received from Texas Homeland Security Director Steve McCraw and FBI special agent in charge of El Paso, David Cuthbertson.

"We have to presume that they will at one time come over here," McCraw said, referring to violent drug cartels. "We have to worry about places like Thomason Hospital, where we take victims of cartel shootings out of Juarez."

About 1,600 died in the bloody drug battle in Juarez last year. And nearly 50 wounded in the violence were brought to Thomason for treatment at a cost of about \$1.4 million.

State Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, said Juarez victims should be taken to William Beaumont Army Medical Center, the military hospital, so that local taxpayers don't have to foot the bill.

"That's the appropriate place to provide the treatment and the security," he said.

McCraw said he had proposed that idea to military officials but was unable to make an arrangement for patients to go to Beaumont.

Until or unless that happens, McCraw said, the state would "absolutely" help with the cost of providing security at Thomason.

Already, he said, some of the grant money Gov. Rick Perry gave the El Paso police and sheriffs departments for state-led border security operations has been used to reimburse them for guarding the hospital.

Shapleigh also asked McCraw what plans the state has to help take down international drug gangs. Perry's plans so far, including installing border Web cameras and sending millions to local sheriffs in remote counties with little crime, Shapleigh said, have been ineffective.

"What are we doing to concretely develop task forces based on proven models on the drug corridors where we know these guys are operating?" Shapleigh asked.

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McCraw said Perry is asking lawmakers this year to set aside money to target and investigate transnational gangs like the Barrio Azteca. Perry has said he plans to seek \$110 million for border security operations along with another \$32 million that would be used to fight drug gangs.

McCraw said Perry would also ask lawmakers to give the Texas Attorney General and the Texas Rangers more money to investigate corrupt law enforcement officials on the border.

Other lawmakers at the hearing expressed concern about recent reports indicating Mexico could be on the verge of collapse.

State Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, asked whether Texas has a contingency plan in place to deal with such a scenario.

"I would think we would have a significant amount of people trying to enter Texas and the United States fleeing for their lives," Patrick said.

McCraw said Texas has the framework for a plan, but he said the state needs a contingency plan to deal with any potential mass migration from Mexico.

El Paso FBI agent Cuthbertson told lawmakers it remains unclear how long the fighting in Mexico will continue but, he said, it has become staggeringly brutal.

Even as the level of atrocity in Mexico increases, though, Cuthbertson said he had seen no signs of

spillover into El Paso.

Federal, state and local law enforcement, he said, can ensure that remains the case by working together and sharing information at all levels.

"If nothing changes in Mexico in their ability to deal with the cartels," he said, "then we've got a long way to go."

Brandi Grissom can be reached at bgrissom@elpasotimes.com; (512) 479-6606.

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